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Recommended Citation

Salisbury, Stephan, "Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 16" (1991). *Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991)*. Paper 9.
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Writers' group opposes nominee

By Stephan Salisbury
Inquirer Staff Writer

The American Center of PEN, the international writers' organization, will formally oppose the Bush administration's most recent nominee to the National Council on the Humanities, according to Larry McMurtry, the novelist and PEN president.

The decision by the organization's board marked the first time in memory that PEN has opposed a nominee to the 26-member council, which reviews grants and policy for the National Endowment for the Humanities.

By so doing, PEN joined a number of scholarly groups that have announced their opposition to the nomination of Carol Iannone, a professor at the Gallatin Division of New York University.

The organizations, which include the Modern Language Association (MLA), the American Council of Learned Societies and the College Art Association, argue that Iannone's career is not distinguished enough to warrant appointment to the council. In addition to teaching at NYU, Iannone has written book reviews and articles for conservative journals of opinion.

Lynne V. Cheney, endowment chairwoman, has called opposition to Iannone elitist and has urged the Senate, which reviews all council nominees, to confirm her.

Over the last few weeks, the debate over the nomination has become increasingly rancorous, with a number of prominent conservatives, notably George Will and William F. Buckley Jr., attacking the MLA and urging confirmation of Iannone.

"We are taking a position in support of the MLA position," McMurtry said yesterday. "That is, that (Iannone) is underqualified."

McMurtry said the organization would declare its opposition in a letter to the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, which is considering the appointment.

Sources at PEN who asked not to be identified said yesterday that members of the organization's executive board also were concerned about an article that Iannone published in the March issue of *Commentary* magazine.

The piece, "Literature by Quota," argues that several prize-winning black novelists, including Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor



Larry McMurtry
Novelist is president of group

***Professor Carol
Iannone lacks
credentials for
humanities advisory
panel, PEN says.***

and Charles Johnson, did not deserve their awards but won them because of a kind of literary affirmative action.

"There was concern about racism," said one member of PEN in discussing the decision to oppose Iannone. Another member of PEN, Joel Conarroe, has expressed similar concerns in the last few days. Norman Podhoretz, *Commentary*'s editor, has said charges of racism are without foundation.

Yesterday, McMurtry said the *Commentary* piece "contained some things in it that I thought were questionable, but that's her opinion."

He emphasized that PEN was basing its opposition on the arguments laid down by the MLA, a 29,000-member group of literature and language scholars.

In March, the MLA wrote to members of the Senate committee, arguing that Iannone's "junior standing and slim scholarly production" rendered her unqualified to serve on the council.